

# WASTE & RECYCLING NEWS

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## Center's goal: sustainable conventions

By Jim Johnson

ATLANTA — Georgia World Congress Center has come a long way regarding sustainability during the past couple of years, but officials there figure the nation's fourth largest convention facility still has plenty of room for improvement.

At a total of 3.9 million square feet — including 1.4 million square feet of exhibit space — the center plays host to some of the largest conventions in the country, including regularly hosting Waste Expo.

Some events are big, some events are huge, and some are quite small as the facility is home to about 300 gatherings per year. Of that total, about 55 would be considered large trade shows attracting thousands of people.

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Patrick Jackson, director of building services, said the Georgia World Congress Center wants to recycle more of the cardboard waste generated during conventions.



## World

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And moving everyone — attendees, exhibitors and staff — in one direction regarding waste management and diversion is a challenge, according to Patrick Skaggs, assistant general manager at the center.

"I think it's never easy. It takes work to separate, educate staff, to educate clients. There's a lot of different stakeholders in the building between our customers and clients who rent the buildings, the exhibitors, the attendees, our temporary workers who work in the building who set up the booths," he said.

"There's just a lot of folks involved. It's always a moving target to get the word out," he said. "We learn on a weekly basis. It evolves over time as we're cap-



Skaggs

turing more and diverting more from the landfill," he said.

One particular challenge a convention center faces while trying to capture recyclable material from the waste stream involves the rush associated with setting up and tearing down exhibit hall space before and after shows.

With little time, it's essentially easier to throw stuff away.

But the facility, officials said, is doing a progressively better job at working with folks in an attempt to divert material from the waste stream.

One key area the center sees is the capture of more and more old corrugated containers — cardboard.

The center has made progress during the past couple of years in recovering that material, but officials still see too much of the material being thrown away.

"Cardboard is one we can really push more because I would say that we have the opportunity to

collect 100% of that if we really put effort into it," said Patrick Jackson, director of building services at the center. "There are literally tons of cardboard that we are throwing away, that the contractors are throwing away."

"It not only diverts it, but it's also money in our pocket," Skaggs said. "It makes sense for us to do it, but also it's the right thing to do because it keeps it out of the landfill."

The Georgia World Congress Center features three buildings and 12 exhibit halls. And that means there's lots of space to cover.

"It's a large footprint, but we have a great staff and containers strategically placed at each of those locations," Jackson said. "We have the ability to collect from every single building."

It's part of Michael Coatney's job as housekeeping services manager to make sure employees at the center are separating recyclables from trash.



Coatney

"Getting them educated," he said, is a key. "Getting them to used to knowing where different materials go."

"A lot of times you run into a lot of contamination because a lot of people are just not on board with recycling. Once we get them in we try to educate the staff. If we can get them to do that, then we can be pretty much successful," Coatney said.

Officials estimated the center historically has recycled 10 to 12% of its waste annually, but is hoping for a higher number for this fiscal year, which is over at the end of June.

"It's going up, every month," Jackson said. "We think we're going to do much better."

While the center has not established a "hard target" of increasing recycling to specific level, Skaggs said, there has been talk of reaching the 20% level or basically doubling past efforts.

A recent show, a Microsoft Dynamics customer conference

called Convergence, featured a 64% diversion rate thanks to coordinated efforts between the conference center, Microsoft and in-house caterer Levy Restaurants.

Some 36 of 57 tons of waste from the event were diverted, the center said, including 1.4 million tons of cardboard and 4.2 million tons of plastic, aluminum, other paper and glass. Some 29 tons of food waste and compostables were shipped to Closed Loop Organics, a nearby composting facility. SP Recycling Corp. handles the other recyclables for the convention center.

"We are constantly working to improve and expand our sustainable practices and hope that numbers like this will be the norm in the future," Skaggs said.

For all of 2009, the center diverted 216 tons from landfills. That number was 96 tons for just the first quarter of this calendar year and did not include work at the Microsoft conference. ■

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